

Operation Us
The School of Professional Psychology at Forest Institute
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March 20, 2010

Dear Members of the Subcommittee on Income Security and Family Support of the House Ways and Means Committee:

I am writing as a representative of a current ACF Healthy Marriage Demonstration Grant (HMDG) to express my grave concern about the Fatherhood, Marriage, and Families Innovation Fund (FMFIF) contained in the 2011 TANF Budget proposal that President Obama submitted a few weeks ago. My primary areas of concern are as follows:

#1 – Total funding for Relationship Education would be cut from an estimated \$111 million per year under the current HMDG/PRF grants to only \$7.5 million per year under the proposed FMFIF.

#2 – This proposal would eliminate funding for the highly successful HMDG programs – without giving grantees the opportunity to demonstrate the success these programs have already shown.

#3 – This proposed approach would violate President Obama's pledge to "fund programs that work and stop funding programs that don't work".

Let us look at each of the above items in more detail:

#1: An estimated \$111 million per year is spent on Relationship Education programs under the combined HMDG/PRF programs. Only one of the eleven activities (9%) listed for the Fatherhood and Marriage Fund, specifically "co-parenting services and conflict resolution" can be interpreted as being related to Relationship Education. None of the four activities listed for the Families Innovations Fund is related at all to Relationship Education. This means that of the entire FMFIF funding, only an estimated \$7.5 million per year likely to be spent on Relationship Education in the proposed budget.

#2 We know that the HMDG programs are successful based upon the following:

Seven published meta-analytic studies have demonstrated that Marriage/Relationship Education programs work to improve couples' communication skills, problem-solving skills and relationship satisfaction. Current HMDG grantees have received thousands of positive testimonials from program participants.

Here in Missouri we are seeing lives changed each week as single parents make better choices about what constitutes a safe and healthy relationship for themselves and their children. Couples, married and unmarried, learn the skills to form and maintain a safe and stable home for the benefit of their kids. High school students learn “relationships smarts” to help them in their current dating and future committed relationships.

As a licensed marriage and family therapist, a licensed clinical psychologist, and a professor who trains future mental health professionals, I have observed that marriage and relationship education is ***a highly cost-effective delivery program that is often more effective than individual and couple therapy delivered by professionals.*** *If we want to do something about driving down health care costs, we should give much more attention to how to deliver these highly effective relationship education services since the links between healthy marriage and overall health and wellbeing are well established.*

#3 – During his election campaign, President Barack Obama pledged that, if elected President, he would “fund programs that work and stop funding programs that don’t work”. Pulling the plug on the HMDG/PRF programs at this time would violate that pledge because the HMDG/PRF grantees, have not been given the opportunity to present their evidence that these programs do, in fact, work.

These very promising HMDG/PRF programs make up less than 1% of the total TANF budget. Over the past seven years, I’ve had the privilege of serving as the Project Director of two different ACF grant. From my experience with Program Officers and ACF programs, I know that you all care very deeply about insuring that the work of ACF has maximum value for children and families across America. I hope that you see the critical importance of moving forward and building upon the groundbreaking HMDG/PRF foundation that we have laid.

Sincerely yours,

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